

THE ELECTION

A-Z

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THE ELECTION
A-Z

Insights, Intrigue and Spin from
50 Years of Political Reporting

NICHOLAS JONES

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Introduction

When discussing with my publisher Matthew Smith our ideas for *The Election A-Z* we thought the outcome of the 2015 general election would be so close there was every likelihood that another coalition government would be inevitable. Little did we know an electorate that was being described as the most unpredictable since the Second World War was about to deliver a result that would be far more decisive than the pollsters and pundits had forecast – a verdict by the voters that would have devastating consequences few had anticipated.

Matthew's aim in commissioning this book was to use the experiences and conclusion of the 2015 campaign as an opportunity to reflect on the highlights and lessons of past general elections. This was my 14th in the five decades I have spent reporting political and industrial affairs. Matthew's invitation to write a fifth election book was an offer I could not resist, a chance to share my thoughts and observations on the highs and lows of electioneering, the strange encounters and off-beat events that have made the campaigns that I have reported so memorable.

We could hardly have chosen a more momentous starting point: against all the odds polling day in May 2015 delivered a Conservative government with an outright majority; shattered the Labour party; decimated the Liberal Democrats; produced an historic landslide for the Scottish National party that redrew the political map of Scotland; and saw the United Kingdom Independence party gain the third largest share of the popular vote yet return only a single MP to the House of Commons.

Journalists share the same doubts as politicians the closer we get to polling day. Like them we sense those times when the mood of the country seems definitely on the turn, but when we also have to acknowledge that the direction of that shift in opinion is too difficult to identify with any accuracy, and when we all have to accept that until the votes are counted no-one can be sure which way the electorate has gone. Two closely-fought general elections in 1974, following on from two elections in rapid succession in the mid-1960s, determined the shape of my career. I was hooked on politics after seeing Harold Wilson lead Labour to victory in 1964 against a Conservative government that had been in power for so long.

Wilson held on to office so tenaciously, fighting four further elections. Labour's two defeats, by Edward Heath and then by Margaret Thatcher in 1979, were defining moments in my career. In the late 1970s I had been assigned by the BBC to report the industrial disputes that dogged James Callaghan's Premiership, only to find that Mrs Thatcher's victory was about to keep reporters on the labour beat fully occupied. The Conservatives' assault on trade union power, plus the break-up of the nationalised industries, dominated the headlines for much of her decade in power.

When I returned to Westminster in the late 1980s the Thatcher years were drawing to a close. Her successor

John Major led the Conservatives to victory against the odds in 1992, and then began the rise of New Labour and the long haul to Tony Blair's historic landslide in 1997. Labour's 13 years in power ended with an indecisive result in 2010, and the formation of a Conservative-Liberal Democrat government, the first coalition of the post-war years. For months the country was led to believe by opinion poll surveys that another hung parliament would again be the outcome in 2015. The pollsters were unanimous in their prediction that the two largest parties were neck-and-neck, and that both the Conservative Prime Minister David Cameron and the Labour leader Ed Miliband might have a chance of gaining power, either through another coalition or perhaps by leading a minority government.

The near certainty of these repeated forecasts that the country was heading for a second indecisive result generated endless speculation about the likely line-up of a future coalition. All manner of scenarios and questions came into play: What chance did Miliband have of convincing the electorate he was a prime minister in waiting, when set against Cameron's five years in office? Would the SNP deliver the wipe-out of Labour in Scotland that had been so widely predicted? Were Liberal Democrat MPs right in believing that the loyalty of their supporters would be enough to see them through on polling day? After topping the poll in the 2014 elections to the European Parliament, were UKIP about to make further inroads into the Conservative and Labour vote?

So many scenarios were being floated that election reporting became something of a turn-off for the public at large, but from the moment the polling stations closed the edifice of conjecture that had prepared the country for another hung parliament started to collapse. An exit poll commissioned by broadcasters for the results night television

programmes was released at 10 p.m. and unexpectedly it put the Conservatives well ahead. Cameron and his election strategists had always been convinced they were doing better than the polls suggested. At last they had the confirmation they had been waiting desperately to hear. Miliband and his campaign team were mortified, scarcely believing the exit poll prediction of 316 seats for the Conservatives with Labour trailing on 238. Miliband had to abandon any thought of a speech claiming he had the right to lead the next government, and instead he had to ready himself for resignation. Early declarations were confirming Labour's worst fears: hard-fought target seats were being retained by the Conservatives who were soon well on their way to an eventual outright majority of 331 seats, an outcome that Cameron declared was 'the sweetest victory of all' when he arrived at party headquarters from the count in his Witney constituency.

Labour finished with 232 MPs on 30.4 per cent of the vote, their lowest share since Michael Foot's defeat in 1983. In his resignation speech Miliband stood by the thrust of his campaign, the advancement of policies that would have reduced inequality, the case 'for a country that works for working people once again'. Almost immediately a battered and bruised parliamentary party, bereft of leading figures such as the shadow chancellor Ed Balls, set in motion an election to choose Miliband's successor. Labour's virtual wipe-out in Scotland, where the party held only one out of 41 seats, was a catastrophic set back. The inexorable advance of the SNP had not only destroyed a previously impregnable Labour's power base, but had also done incalculable electoral damage south of the border, having strengthened support for Cameron.

Miliband never succeeded in countering the Conservatives' claim that the nationalists would have become the dominant

force if he had needed the support of the SNP leader Nicola Sturgeon when attempting to lead a coalition or minority government. Under her leadership, she had turned defeat in the 2014 referendum on Scottish independence into a launch pad for a bid to become Scotland's voice at Westminster, a campaign that generated unprecedented swings in the SNP's favour and a virtual clean sweep of Scotland's 59 constituencies leaving the Conservatives, Labour and Liberal Democrats each with a single seat.

Fear of an SNP-dominated coalition was exploited ruthlessly by the Conservatives as Ms Sturgeon piled on the pressure for Miliband to co-operate with her so that together Labour and the SNP could 'lock David Cameron out of Downing Street'. Backed to the hilt by Conservative-supporting newspapers, Cameron's Australian election strategist Lynton Crosby pursued tactics that succeeded in driving a wedge that peeled off wavering supporters from both Labour and the Liberal Democrats. The prospect that Ms Sturgeon would be able to dictate policy on both spending cuts and the future of the Trident nuclear deterrent, fuelled a succession of scare stories that warned of what would happen if a Miliband-led government came under the influence of the 'most dangerous woman in Britain'.

From the outset Miliband had stood out against media proprietors, repeatedly mentioning Rupert Murdoch by name. Labour's manifesto called for the introduction of a system of press self-regulation endorsed by Royal Charter, and proposed a review of the concentration of media holdings. In return Miliband was constantly denigrated by newspapers such as the *Sun*, *Daily Mail* and *Daily Telegraph* to a degree that shocked Labour's American election strategist David Axelrod, a former adviser to President Barack Obama. Axelrod considered the

British press was more partisan and aggressive in its reporting than even the biased pro-Republican coverage of Murdoch's American television channel Fox News.

Labour's post-election analysis, like that of the Liberal Democrats, acknowledged that their basic strategic error was to have been misled by opinion polls that were still predicting a dead heat right up until polling day. If Miliband's team had known the pollsters' forecasts were so inaccurate, they say he would have concentrated their attack on the dangers of a second Conservative government rather than getting side tracked into a debate about for conditions for another coalition. The Liberal Democrats' campaign team argued that they too had been blindsided by the inaccuracy of the polls. If their leader Nick Clegg had realised the Conservatives had a clear lead, he would have strengthened the Liberal Democrats' argument that only they could moderate a lurch to the right by a future Tory government.

Clegg, for five years the Deputy Prime Minister, paid a devastating price for having led his 57 MPs into coalition with the Conservatives. He and his colleagues accepted Cameron's invitation to put party politics aside in the national interest so that together they could tackle the financial crisis left by the crash of 2008, a brave but risky decision that became increasingly toxic after a string of tactical errors. Until seeing with utter disbelief the exit poll forecast of 10 seats they had remained confident of retaining at least 30, but when abandoned by so many previously loyal supporters disaffected by the Liberal Democrats' role in coalition, they could not withstand the Conservatives' advance. Brutal eviction from all the constituencies the Liberal Democrats held in south-west England, as well as from other strongholds that had been theirs for decades, reduced their number to eight MPs, the

lowest since the 1970s. The near annihilation of a party that had seemed assured in its role as the third force in British politics was such a calamitous outcome Clegg had no option but join Miliband in standing down, their two resignations taking place within an hour of each other.

Barely a month had passed, and the eight surviving MPs had just set about deciding who should replace Clegg, when their woeful plight was made even worse by the sudden death of their former leader Charles Kennedy, one of ten Liberal Democrats in Scotland who lost their seats in the tidal wave of support for the SNP. Kennedy led his party's opposition in 2003 to Tony Blair's backing for the US invasion of Iraq. His reward in 2005 was securing almost six million votes, and the election of 62 Liberal Democrat MPs, the best result since 1923 and the days of the leadership of Lloyd George. Kennedy was said by colleagues to be the only Liberal Democrat MP who declined to vote in favour of entering a coalition with Cameron. He feared being re-branded Liberal Conservatives would drive 'a strategic coach and horses' through the realignment of the centre left, and damage if not destroy what he believed was a great Liberal tradition. In his concession speech at the count after losing Ross, Skye and Lochaber by 5,000 votes, a seat he had held for 32 years, he told his supporters they would be able to tell their grandchildren they were there the night of the long skean dhus (knives).

Opinion pollsters who had called the shots throughout the pre-election period, commanding widespread attention in the news media, ran for cover when faced by a barrage of complaints for having misled the country and encouraged Labour and Liberal Democrats to pursue election strategies that assumed another coalition was imminent. Hundreds of polls were published during an extended campaign and

11 released on the eve of the election were unanimous in predicting a dead heat, a lamentable record that prompted the British Polling Council to launch an inquiry to discover why all the polling companies had so under-estimated the scale of the Conservatives' lead over Labour.

A promise by the pollsters to follow any recommendations to re-adjust the systems they used did little to lessen the demands for a ban on the publication of polls for up to seven days before an election. The clamour to change the voting system also gathered pace after a study by the Electoral Reform Society showed that the 2015 result was the most disproportionate in the history of UK elections. The lottery of first-past-the-post had piled up 7.4 million votes for UKIP, the Liberal Democrats and the Greens yet the three parties finished up with only 10 MPs between them. Their combined share of the vote was 24.3 per cent, but a winner-takes-all voting system meant the Conservatives, who gained 11.3 million votes, a 36.9 per cent share, returned with a grand total of 331 MPs. An alliance formed by leaders of the smaller parties gave their support to a petition calling for the introduction of proportional representation. If a single transferable vote system had been in place the ERS calculated that UKIP would have gained 54 seats, Liberal Democrats 26 and Greens 3. Conservatives would have remained the largest party, but their tally would have fallen to 276, forcing them to find coalition partners. Cameron's outright majority of 12, well under John Major's 1992 margin of 21, was a far shakier mandate than he would have preferred as he prepared for the referendum on the UK's membership on European Union that his government had promised to hold before the end of 2017. One legacy of the 2010 coalition was a change in the law to fixed five-year parliaments, an arrangement that Labour hoped would give

the party time to rebuild support after its catastrophic losses in Scotland and its continued failure to win seats in southern England. The Liberal Democrats too faced an uphill task to restore their credibility with the electorate.

UK 2015 general election result					
	Seats	gains	losses	votes	share
Conservative	331	35	11	11,334,576	36.9
Labour	232	22	48	9,347,304	30.4
Scottish National party	56	50	0	1,454,436	4.7
Liberal Democrat	8	0	49	2,415,862	7.9
Sinn Fein	4	0	1	176,232	0.6
Plaid Cymru	3	0	0	181,704	0.6
SDLP	3	0	0	99,809	0.3
Ulster Unionist	2	2	0	114,935	0.4
UKIP	1	1	0	3,881,099	12.6
Green	1	0	0	1,157,613	3.8

A

election advertising

Political advertising is always a contentious issue in general election campaigns thanks to the ingenuity of Britain's advertising and public relations industries. Donations from big business have invariably given the Conservatives far greater fire power than Labour. As well as their financial superiority, there is the added flair and creativity that derives from a strong association with the world of commercial promotion. Advertising agencies and public relations consultants tend to have a far closer affinity with management rather than workers, with employers rather than trade unions, and by the very nature of their business they have to maintain an effective working relationship with media proprietors, who themselves have a heavy bias towards the Conservatives.

Posters and newspaper advertisements, which for so long were the two most widely used forms of paid-for election advertising, have found their previous dominance has been increasingly challenged by far more sophisticated and targeted forms of communication such as direct mail, telephone canvassing and most recently by advertising and marketing via the internet. A significant shift was seen in the 2010 general

election, when much of the expenditure started to move from billboards and press advertising towards spending on social media and direct marketing, a trend that accelerated still further during the 2015 campaign.

Online political promotion has the advantage for party activists of being outside the scope of regulatory frameworks. Unlike radio and television, political content on the internet is not monitored or assessed by the broadcasting regulator Ofcom. Equally the remit of the Advertising Standards Authority does not extend to political advertising. Nonetheless there are self-imposed tests of taste and decency that newspapers apply to all advertisements; billboard contractors have similar voluntary restraints. But unencumbered by any such inhibitions, the internet offers a virtual free for all, a platform for abuse and often inaccuracy that is not permitted in traditional media outlets. An image that might once have been destined to appear in a newspaper advertisement or poster can be far more daring in an online format, and more importantly can be transmitted digitally within an instant. Twitter, Facebook, YouTube and a limitless range of other sites all provide opportunities for political promotion, and a constant dialogue with a much more targeted audience.

Since the 2005 election the parties have had to contend with an ever growing army of internet insurgents only too keen to parody political campaigns. Online mischief reached new heights in the lead-up to polling day in 2010, and again in 2015. As in-house designers and copywriters stepped up the intensity of their lines of attack, becoming ever more aggressive and hurtful, so they became the targets for retaliation from activists supporting their opponents. An ability to photo shop and spoof any and every political message did tend to have a levelling effect on the internet, but in terms of originality

and overall impact the Conservatives' had the edge over their opponents, benefiting once again from their traditional links with advertising and the wider communications industry.

Election strategists are eager for more research into the extent to which online campaigning helps deliver electors to polling stations, especially as many older voters do not spend so much of their time on the internet, but the 2015 election did mark another milestone in extending still further the vast reach of social media. There was a rapid increase in paid-for messaging by the Conservatives, and a great deal of effort went into preparing online advertisements and commentaries for posting on Facebook and YouTube.

Instead of using advertising to establish a national presence, the party stepped up its direct marketing in marginal constituencies. Liberal Democrat constituencies in the south-west of England were among those targeted, and a clean sweep of seats previously held by their former coalition partners was a vindication of the tactics adopted by the Conservatives' Australian election strategist Lynton Crosby and his colleague Jim Messina, who masterminded Barack Obama's re-election in 2012. Their strategy was to identify potential Tory voters and then target them via direct mail and social media. On the basis of his data and research, Messina was said to have predicted a week before polling day that support for the Conservatives was continuing to build and that David Cameron would win at least 306 seats, far higher than the polls were predicting at the time.

Having switched resources to expensive but targeted promotion and marketing, the Conservatives concluded there was little to be gained from repeating the national advertising of previous elections. Posters on hoardings across the country and full-page newspaper advertisements were used in the past

to create momentum. Wherever voters went, and whatever their popular paper, there was often a paid-for reminder of the party's key themes. Blanket coverage of that nature has become far too costly, given the need to concentrate advertising in the areas around the seats that are being targeted and to pay for extra promotional activity online. The lack of posters except in marginal constituencies was a notable feature of the 2015 campaign. More than half the seats in the country rarely if ever change hands, and the absence of the usual billboard reminders was a source of disappointment to many party workers. Except in hotly contested seats there were also far fewer posters being displayed by householders in their front windows and gardens, another pointer to the shift that has taken place.

Although online messaging has hastened the demise of traditional forms of election advertising many of the challenges remain the same. Compressing a political message into a few words, and then creating a relevant illustration, are tasks that require a highly disciplined approach, whether from a left or right wing perspective. Whatever the political direction, election slogans do matter, and the choice is limited: should it be positive, perhaps a much-heralded pledge alongside an image of the party leader, or a negative approach, attacking rival policies and personalities? Either way political parties have to be bold and assertive if they are to make an impact. They hope their claims and counter-claims might be newsworthy, perhaps attract the attention of political journalists, and gain extra publicity. Their efforts are not always risk free: catchy phrases that appeared both relevant and correct at the start of a campaign can get overtaken by events, backfire or get mocked by their opponents.

Party election broadcasts are another much valued platform, but their content and timing is strictly regulated. Political advertising is banned on television and radio, unlike the USA where vast fortunes are spent on the attack advertisements that dominate American television and have done so much to debase the discourse between Democrats and Republicans during presidential and congressional elections. In many ways Britain's tabloid newspapers perform a similar role as attack dogs, abusing politicians and trivialising their work. Their editorial freedom to de-stabilise governments or opposition, and to pump out propaganda on behalf of the party of their choice, is seen as one of the conditions of a free press.

While in no way seeking to minimise the disparity resulting from the might of Conservative funding and the pro-Tory weighting of the national press, there are at least some limits on party spending once an election is underway. Another balancing factor is a regulated system of broadcasting that cannot take sides politically and is required to give a platform to minority parties. Inevitably, blatant bias and character assassination in the pages of the national press can have a lasting effect, but research has shown that what perhaps has the greatest influence before electors decide how to vote is the opportunity to see and hear what a party leader says, to listen how they respond to difficult questions, a chance for voters to form a judgment on the capability and trustworthiness of a future prime minister. A peak audience of 9.9 million for the UK's first televised leaders' debate in 2010 was an indication of the demand for direct access and the vast appetite for a chance to see a considered discussions between the leading contenders.

While politicians on the left insist they are at a perpetual disadvantage because of an in-built press bias in favour of the Conservatives, which they claim feeds across to broadcast

and online coverage, Tony Blair's historic landslide in the 1997 general election demonstrated that the Labour party was capable of harnessing the support of hitherto hostile newspapers. Like Margaret Thatcher before him, Blair succeeded in winning over and then retaining the support of the media proprietors. British prime ministers do tend to be pretty invincible during that perhaps brief period when they have an impregnable parliamentary majority and the overwhelming support of the national press. Mrs Thatcher was backed to the hilt by most newspapers during her assault on trade union power in the bitter industrial disputes of the 1980s, just as Blair had widespread support from the popular press was when he joined forces with George Bush and took Britain into the Iraq War in 2003.

For good or for ill, the national press continues to retain considerable influence over the course of day to day politics. Circulations might have fallen sharply but the content, tone and editorial direction of the daily newspapers often dominates the wider news agenda; their story lines get picked up online and then initiate and sustain much of the commentary on social media. Political advertising in the press and on posters, by magnifying the positive or negative messages of the opposing sides, feeds into that broader conversation. The more provocative the advertisements, the greater the chance they will grab the attention of newspapers, radio and television and bolster the narrative that each party is attempting to promote.

Every election tends to generate heated arguments over the legitimacy, and sometimes the truthfulness, of the claims that are being made. However manufactured or synthetic the row that might develop, journalists seize on such stories as they are a welcome diversion from the tedium of complicated

arguments over policy issues. Politicians scrapping with each other can live up radio and television coverage, and provide good copy for the newspapers.

Some advertisements are so imaginative in capturing a political mood or moment that their impact endures long after the election in which they first appeared. To the dismay of their opponents an image or statement devised by advertising agency can earn a place in political folklore. When reprinted in newspapers or featured in television programmes they provide an instant visual reminder of past failings or abuses.

The Saatchis' infamous 'Labour isn't working' poster, with a dole queue snaking off into the distance, developed a life of its own during the 1979 general election campaign, and perhaps not surprisingly given the number of times the image has since been reproduced, was voted best poster of the century by the advertising magazine *Campaign* in 1999. Its longevity results from an association with one of the defining chapters of Britain's post-war political history, the so-called 'Winter of Discontent' that culminated in the defeat of the then Labour government and Mrs Thatcher's election as Prime Minister.

When it first appeared in August 1978, the Conservative party was on the offensive, fearing that Labour might go to the country that autumn. In the event, despite the build-up being generated by his supporters and in the press, Prime Minister James Callaghan opted against a snap general election, deciding instead to soldier on for another year. Callaghan failed to take seriously warnings from the trade union movement that there was every likelihood of industrial action if his government tried to impose another round of wage restraint. Strikes that winter disrupted services across the public sector. The Saatchi poster, together with photographs of piles of uncollected rubbish, has become part of a tapestry

of images used by the media to illustrate the decline and eventual defeat of the Callaghan government.

Maurice and Charles Saatchi, who had been working on the Conservatives' advertising account for just six months, could hardly believe their good fortune when the Chancellor of the Exchequer Denis Healey criticised the poster in the House of Commons. He accused the Conservatives of 'selling politics like soap-powder', claiming that the people in the photograph were not genuinely unemployed but actually a line of Saatchi employees. Healey had made the fatal mistake of helping to promote a Conservative poster that was immensely damaging to Labour's prospects, and in the process he generated the kind of publicity that the Saatchis craved. His failure to have taken the precaution of thinking through a counter-attack that he could have used to damage the Tories was a miscalculation that Labour avoided 18 years later when another Saatchi advertisement created headline news.

In the summer of 1996 John Major's government was hanging on, counting down to a general election the following spring, but his party was determined to mount the strongest possible campaign against the rise of New Labour and perhaps avert of what seemed the near certainty of a landslide victory for Blair. As part of their pre-election fight back, the Conservatives launched an advertising campaign that proclaimed 'New Labour, New Danger'. A pair of vivid red curtains, with a pair of red, bloodshot eyes staring out, were intended to represent the front behind which New Labour was hiding.

Within a few weeks of flaming red posters appearing all over the country, the shadow transport minister, Clare Short, inadvertently gave substance to the lurid imagery created by M&C Saatchi. In an interview for the *New Statesman* she

justified her criticism of Blair's two leading spin doctors, Peter Mandelson and Alastair Campbell, by accusing them of having briefed journalists against her: 'Everything they do is in hiding...Everything we do is in the light...I sometimes call them the people who live in the dark.'

Maurice Saatchi was given two days by the Conservative Party chairman Dr Brian Mawhinney to update the 'New Labour, New Danger' campaign in time for the weekend press. The advertisement he presented for approval showed a photograph of Blair with a big grin on his face and red, demon-like eyes. It appeared in only three newspapers that August Sunday, one of which the *Mail on Sunday* used the claim that Blair was manipulating policy in 'a sinister way' as the basis for a front-page splash.

Summer parliamentary recesses often find political journalists at a loose end, idle hands looking for mischief, only too willing perhaps to be exploited by a spin doctor conversant in the black arts of media manipulation. I heard subsequently from the Conservatives' director of communications Charles Lewington, who was with Mawhinney when they approved the advertisement that Saatchi had been far more nervous about putting demon eyes on Blair than either of them, because he feared it would provoke a storm of protest.

Mandelson had sensed the Conservatives' vulnerability. In contrast to Healey's full-frontal attack, he launched a far more deadly assault by engineering what turned into a mini media frenzy. There appeared no limits, he said, to the depths to which the Tories would sink in personalising their negative attacks on New Labour. 'Tony Blair is a practising Christian...to portray him as the devil is a crass, clumsy move.' Mandelson's masterstroke was that he had gained the support of the Bishop of Oxford, the Right Reverend Richard Harries. He denounced

the vilification of politicians. His contention was that 'when that vilifying draws on satanic imagery it is not only silly but potentially dangerous'.

Labour considered their protests had been more than justified when the Advertising Standards Authority decided that the advertisement breached the industry's code of conduct because it had depicted Blair as 'sinister and dishonest'. The ruling was one of the last of its kind. In 1999 the ASA excluded political advertising from its remit because of concerns about the legality of restraining freedom of speech around democratic elections.

There can be as many potential pitfalls with a positive rather than negative campaign. Billboard advertising promoting the Conservatives' pledge to protect spending on the NHS was constantly vandalised and spoofed online in the run-up to the 2010 election. The first poster featured an obviously air-brushed photograph of David Cameron wearing an open-necked shirt, alongside the slogan, 'We can't go on like this. I'll cut the deficit, not the NHS.'

Graffiti artists with paintbrushes began defacing hoardings up and down the country, eagerly taking advantage of the copywriter's failure to realise that the slogan was open to endless variations. Cameron's favourite was said to be the poster in Hereford which was altered to give him an Elvis Presley-style haircut and the slogan was tweaked to reference a line from one of Presley's hits: 'We can't go on like this. With Suspicious Minds.' Even more imaginative versions appeared online and Cameron's smooth, blemish-free face became the most mocked image of the campaign. For once tabloid attack dogs had to take a back seat as viral graffiti artists and vandals turned the Conservatives' billboards into a laughing stock.

The first poster to cut through the extended election of 2015 was launched two months from polling day, and went on to become the most parodied image of the campaign. M&C Saatchi's aim was to build on fears that a Labour-led minority government would end up under the control of the Scottish National party, a line of attack that would be exploited relentlessly by the Conservatives. A miniature Ed Miliband was seen peeping out of the top jacket pocket of the former First Minister of Scotland Alex Salmond, who led the SNP's campaign in the 2014 referendum on Scottish independence. By lunchtime on the day the poster was launched a rival version appeared online. David Cameron was depicted peering out of the jacket pocket of Nigel Farage, leader of the United Kingdom Independence party.

Portraying Miliband and Cameron as mere playthings was a reminder of the lampooning of the 'two Davids' by Spitting Image during conflict in the 1980s over the leadership of the SDP-Liberal Alliance when David Owen's adoring sidekick David Steel was often shown tucked into his jacket pocket. In a review of the 2015 campaign for the *Guardian*, Margaret Thatcher's former media adviser Lord Tim Bell praised the Salmond-Miliband poster for being so single-minded and visually rewarding. 'It's also very funny. People are more likely to receive a message if you deliver it with humour than if you shout of them.'

An earlier much-criticised attempt to make capital out of the SNP's potential hold over Labour had pictured Miliband on the doorstep of 10 Downing Street standing beside Salmond and the Sinn Fein President Gerry Adams with the caption, 'Your worst nightmare ... just got even worse'. A YouTube version featured a soundtrack that included the noise of breaking glass. The launch a month later of the

image of Miliband in Salmond's pocket immediately caught the attention of the media, and it was widely reproduced in press coverage. M&C Saatchi re-worked the poster when Salmond's successor Nicola Sturgeon was hailed the shock winner of the first televised leaders' debate. Shortly after the programme, finished the Conservatives rushed out an online version showing a hapless-looking Miliband peering out of the jacket pocket of a smiling and contented Ms Sturgeon. The same theme was adopted in a later poster that depicted the SNP leader as a puppet-master holding up a wriggling Miliband.

Posters may longer dominate hoardings across the country during elections, but they do often appear, if only briefly, on the side of advertising campaign vans or as a backdrop for news conferences. Their great value is online where images created by advertising agencies can be constantly refashioned to suit a changing news agenda. The durability of the 1978 'Labour isn't working' poster is a testament to the potency of the Saatchis' original concept and slogan. A Labour parody in the 2015 campaign replaced the line-up of jobless workers with a long queue of patients, some in wheelchairs, outside a waiting room, with the headline, 'The doctor can't see you now'. Cameron's outright majority, and Miliband's swift resignation from the leadership, appeared to have eliminated the possibility that he might once again be portrayed as a plaything of Ms Sturgeon, but there is every likelihood that many others will end up being depicted in the top pocket of a powerful politician.

B

battle buses

Political parties face a constant challenge trying to find new ways to grab voters' attention. Each election presents a fresh challenge as the parties struggle to exploit the very latest techniques in presentation and communication. Three televised leaders' debates transformed the 2010 general election, a reminder to the strategists if one were needed that yet another political game changer might be in the offing. In the seemingly interminable build-up to polling day in May 2015, party managers agonised over how best to come to terms with the explosion in online messaging and the whole of phenomenon of social media. Having seen the impact of Twitter, Facebook, YouTube, emails, text messages and the like during hectic campaigning ahead of the 2014 referendum on Scottish independence, they were desperate to take advantage of every electronic advance, hoping to steal a march on their rivals.

Election campaigns were far easier to plan and manage before the days of 24-hours news coverage, mobile phones and especially the immediacy of the internet. By the late 1970s the pace was quickening: BBC and ITV were expanding

their regional news and current affairs output, and although breakfast television and rolling news were still some years away, local programmes provided an increasingly important platform for politicians. David Steel, who in 1979 was facing his first general election as leader of the Liberal party, was about to break new ground by introducing the election **battle bus**, a converted coach that became a mobile office and headquarters. Travelling by road from one campaign stop to the next was a long-established feature of American elections; party activists and journalists bonded well together, and became known as the Boys on the Bus.

Steel thought his US import might help satisfy the insatiable demand of television crews and photographers. What better way to provide action and lots of moving pictures as he criss-crossed the country to far flung constituencies than to arrive and depart in his own bus, complete with party logo and slogan. Steel looks back with fondness on what he claims was a first for British politics, as I do too, because I drove countless miles chasing after him.

My assignment for BBC Radio 4 was to stick as closely as possible to Steel for the duration of the campaign. Rather than join other journalists on board, I had to follow the battle bus in my BBC-issue Morris Marina because I needed to peel off when required in order to file reports from the nearest BBC local radio station, and then re-join the pack at his next engagement.

Steel's decision to take to the road was news in itself because leading politicians were having to be provided with an unprecedented level of police security following the death in March 1979 of the Conservative MP Airey Neave, who was killed when a magnetic car bomb exploded under his Vauxhall Cavalier as he drove out of the underground car park at the House of Commons.

His assassination, claimed by the Irish National Liberation Army, had shocked and alarmed MPs and peers, and only added to the turmoil created by the defeat two days earlier of the Prime Minister James Callaghan. The Labour government had lost a House of Commons motion of no confidence by one vote 311-310, and the day before Neave was killed, MPs had been coming to terms with the finality of events the night before. Parliament would have to be dissolved and Callaghan forced to hold a general election in early May.

Neave had been a staunch supporter of Margaret Thatcher, who had called for the vote of no confidence. His assassination was thought to have been timed to exploit the political uncertainty at Westminster. After her election as Conservative Party leader in 1975 she had appointed Neave head of her private office and later he was promoted to shadow Secretary of State for Northern Ireland. He had backed the Army's hard line against both Loyalist and Republican paramilitaries, and the targeting of one of Mrs Thatcher's closest confidants so soon after Callaghan's defeat had put the entire political establishment on edge.

Journalists shared that sense of vulnerability as we were all having to come to terms with the implications of a fatal terrorist attack inside the precincts of the Palace of Westminster. Neave, MP for Abingdon, had been on good terms with political correspondents. I first made contact with him in the late 1960s, during my years as local government reporter for the *Oxford Mail*, and then subsequently in the mid to late 1970s when reporting for the BBC from Belfast. Having filed reports from the scene of some of the many explosions and shootings during the Troubles, I realised after Neave's death that security for the general election would be like no other. When journalists had our first sight

of the battle bus we were told Steel would be accompanied throughout the campaign by a team of three plain clothes police officers; I assumed they would be armed but I did not inquire too closely.

I recall Steel and his campaign team being rather taken aback by the level of protection, but he told me he had been given a pretty chilling explanation as to why he was considered especially vulnerable. 'I had heard in a roundabout way from Ted Heath's personal assistant why the threat to the leader of the Liberal Party was being taken so seriously. Apparently an attempt on my life would have the greatest potential for publicity because I was seen as a soft target, likely to have the most minimal level of protection.' Notwithstanding the potential gravity of the circumstances, he seemed undaunted by prospect of having police officers in constant attendance, although as we toured the country the reaction to their presence ranged from disbelief and bewilderment to a touch of anxiety at local party headquarters that previously had rarely if ever commanded the attention of the Police.

Steel was one of only 13 Liberal MPs and the constituencies they represented were hundreds of miles apart, so resources were stretched as the party made preparations to contest not far short of 600 seats. Hiring a battle bus to inject excitement into the campaign built on the success of Steel's predecessor Jeremy Thorpe whose astute political showmanship had helped generate a revival in Liberal fortunes in the mid-1970s. In the general election of February 1974 the Liberals polled more than 6 million votes, their highest share since the 1920s, securing 14 seats, but in the October election six months later, despite once again being whisked around the country in helicopters and hovercraft, Thorpe failed to achieve the same turnout and the Liberals lost one of their MPs.

Steel's belief that his battle bus might prove just as eye catching in the 1979 election was fulfilled. National and regional television news programmes were able to draw on a great variety of footage as we sped along main roads or pulled into town centres. He had a ready-made, distinctive backdrop for interviews and to their great satisfaction, camera crews were able to provide arrival and departure shots that were a step up from the predictable image of a party leader arriving at a railway station or climbing out of a car. Television correspondents need a constant supply of tracking shots to illustrate their commentaries and images of Steel on the move were in demand in order to provide balanced coverage.

Each weekend we returned to the Scottish Borders so that Steel could spend time campaigning in his constituency of Roxburgh, Selkirk and Peebles. His home was in the village of Ettrickbridge where I had use of a radio line and microphone tucked into the corner of a former schoolroom that doubled up as the village playgroup. Once Steel had finished attending meetings, or perhaps giving evening speeches in the constituency, the role of the duty police officer was to accompany him home. Having safely 'delivered' the leader, the officer could re-join his colleagues back at their hotel at Selkirk. They were soon very familiar with the ten minute drive along empty roads and apparently enjoyed seeing who could clock up the shortest time for the journey, a dash of excitement in what otherwise had become a rather uneventful tour of duty.

Margaret Thatcher's clear victory over Callaghan put paid to Steel's hopes of a recovery in Liberal fortunes. The party lost just over a million votes and another two MPs, but the battle bus had made its mark, and from its humble beginnings as a rather modest charabanc would morph in subsequent elections into a high-tech mobile communications centre.

When Steel's successor Paddy Ashdown toured the country in a canary yellow campaign coach in the 1992 general election, the battle bus rosette went to the Conservatives. In the second week of the campaign we all assembled in Smith Square for the delivery outside Conservative Central Office of John Major's pride and joy. His enthusiasm was infectious as he showed off what he said was his 'fabulous' travelling campaign headquarters; it came complete with computer terminals, cellular telephones and fax machines.

After the somewhat rudimentary precautions afforded to Steel I was intrigued by the awesome in-built security: two tons of armour plating and bullet-proof glass. My interest in the level of protection being provided for the Prime Minister was not appreciated by the Tory party chairman Chris Patten. A terrorist attack was a constant threat: 'Don't you realise the IRA are trying to kill one of us?' I should have known better: Patten's curt dismissal of my inquiry reminded me that Margaret Thatcher had always favoured travelling by road in an election battle bus rather going by train because railway bridges were thought to be an easier target for the IRA.

Steel would have given his right arm for the sophistication of Major's mobile communications centre during the 1987 general election when he and David Owen criss-crossed the country in matching yellow coaches in support of the alliance formed by the Liberals and Social Democratic Party. Mobile phones were a rarity and political correspondents on the two battle buses took delight in playing off one David against the other. The shared but troubled leadership of the SDP-Liberal Alliance by the 'Two Davids' had been satirised relentlessly by *Spitting Image*; a squeaky-voiced Steel sat in the pocket of Owen.

As the campaign progressed the relationship soured. Journalists on the rival buses spent the day hunting for

contradictions. Whenever there was a stop, they rang their offices so they could compare and contrast what Steel and Owen were saying. Conflicting statements on defence and the possibility of a hung parliament only served to damage still further the credibility and electoral prospects of the Alliance, resulting a year later in a merger to form the Liberal Democrats. If the 'Two Davids' had been able to keep in touch with each other by mobile phone they would have had a greater chance of thwarting the news media and perhaps there might have been fewer headlines about splits in the Alliance.

A seat on a Prime Minister's battle bus used to be a sure sign of seniority and experience. An ability to brief key political correspondents while out on the road saved precious time, but shortly before the 2005 general election journalists heard that there would be no campaign coach for the Labour leader. Tony Blair intended to scale back media access. He no longer had any wish to have journalists travelling with him in such close proximity. However, his opponent Michael Howard did take to the road despite one embarrassing news story to the effect that the Conservative leader was about to tour the country in a battle bus that was failing to display an up-to-date tax disc. Howard's press secretary Jonathan Collett remembered travelling 15,000 miles in five weeks. The bus was a centre of attraction whenever it stopped in towns and villages. 'Our arrival created an event, giving the leader's tour a sense of urgency, in a highly visible form of brand messaging, perfect fodder for the television crews.'

Clocking up thousands of miles crisscrossing the country for campaign stops in marginal constituencies was no longer an option for the 2010 election once the broadcasters managed to end years of stalemate and secure the party leaders' agreement for three televised debates. Election planners

realised that spending all day travelling was hardly be the best preparation for a series of head-to-head confrontations that were certain to attract a mass television audience and might have the greatest impact on the result. David Cameron's refusal to participate in a second round of head-to-debates in the 2015 election heralded a comeback for the battle bus. His decision to opt for an extended six-week campaign to allow more time to debate policy, and to visit swing seats, meant that he and his opponents would be back on the road. Campaign staff needed a travelling headquarters that would make an impact on campaign stops, and double up as a mobile studio and briefing area for journalists.

Nick Clegg's was considered the most sophisticated of the three executive coaches hired for the election. Nicknamed the 'yellow peril', it had a satellite transmitter to allow Clegg to conduct radio interviews on the move. Journalists had to pay £750 to spend a day on board whereas Labour charged £100 a day for a ride in a silver coach that carried the slogan, 'A better plan, a better future'. Unlike Clegg, who was often filmed in his battle bus, Ed Miliband travelled more frequently by train. Of the three leaders, David Cameron clocked up the most miles travelling by road. His battle bus was decorated with union flags and sported leather seats and plasma television screens, but a ticket to ride was by invitation only.

The Greens won the prize for innovation: a double-decker bus fuelled by recycled chip fat and vegetable oil that provided a perfect environmentally-friendly back drop for their leader Natalie Bennett. A pink minibus emblazoned with the words 'woman to woman' attracted the most publicity after it was unveiled three months before polling day by Labour's deputy leader Harriet Harman. Her aim was to get the party's women MPs out into winnable seats talking to women 'around the

kitchen table' about the issues that affected their lives. Labour was accused by the tabloid press of being patronising and sexist. Ms Harman was mocked by the headline writers: 'Harriet's pink Barbie bus' (*Daily Mail*) and 'Hattie's batty battle bus' (*Sun*). A host of Twitter spoofs portrayed Barbie dolls driving an array of pink vehicles. On its first outing to Stevenage, Ms Harman and two fellow MPs, Caroline Flint and Gloria de Piero, made light of the online jokes and parodies. Their target was the nine million women who failed to vote in 2010. As the campaign progressed, and the pro-Tory press found other targets, Labour had the satisfaction of securing plenty of photographs and column inches in local newspapers only too keen to report the arrival of the controversial pink minibus in marginal constituencies across the country.

The battle buses of 2015 more than met David Steel's objective of 1979: they helped meet the media's demand for photo-opportunities, while at the same time providing a travelling base for the party leaders, aides and journalists. The length of the campaign, and the distances that were travelled, justified the investment. If the Conservative government survives the full five years of a second fixed Parliament the likelihood is that another drawn-out campaign will again see battle buses back on the road in 2020.